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SUBJECT: MIXED INITIAL REACTIONS TO PRESIDENT OBAMA'S
AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY SPEECH

11. (U) Summary: President Obama's Afghanistan strategy speech aired early the morning of December 2 in Kabul, leaving Afghan politicians, political analysts, and government officials the day to both praise and criticize the President's strategy. While some commentators praised Obama's renewed focus on Afghanistan, others questioned whether the strategy was any different from what they had seen in the past. Similarly, some praised Obama's resolve to begin removing troops in 2011, while voicing concern that the announcement of a timeframe was premature. Most analysts lauded the President's inclusion of Pakistan in his strategy, but questioned that country's resolve to eradicate terrorism within its own borders. End Summary.

The Same Ol' Strategy?

12. (U) During a December 2 roundtable discussion at the Afghan Government Media and Information Center (GMIC), political analysts praised President Obama's renewed focus on Afghanistan. Kabul University Professor Ahmad Zia Rafhat told journalists he is optimistic that, after eight years, the international community has a better understanding of Afghanistan and will employ lessons learned from past mistakes. Daoud Muradian, Director of the Foreign Ministry's Strategic Studies Office, called Obama's emphasis of Afghanization "a very good point" and commented favorably on the international community's realization that terrorist safe havens lie across the border in Pakistan.

13. (U) However, other analysts saw little new in President Obama's strategy and questioned whether the United States possesses the resolve to win in Afghanistan. Although Kabul University Professor Stanekzai assessed the strategy positively in the GMIC discussion, in a separate interview with Radio Azadi, he criticized the international community for its lack of coordination in their activities and strategy over the past eight years. Karzai supporter MP Shukria Barakzai questioned the expectation that Afghans will assume security responsibility in two years, commenting during a Tolo TV roundtable aired the same day that the United States and the international community had not trained and equipped the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) over the past eight years. Also at the GMIC event, a journalist from Bakhtar News Agency questioned whether the United States would now choose to sufficiently equip the Afghan Army when, over the last eight years, they had been given barely any equipment "besides three broken planes."

Transferring Power Or Pulling Out?

14. (U) Some political pundits interpreted our summer 2011 time line to begin withdrawing our combat troops as part of our strategy to build Afghan capacity and then transfer security leadership to the rightful owners - the Afghans.

Referencing the goal to begin decreasing combat forces in 2011, Professor Stanekzai reassured the GMIC audience that the United States "is not here to occupy Afghanistan." Professor Ahmad Zia Rafhat told the journalists that while discussing a troop increase and exit strategy simultaneously may sound paradoxical, it in fact impresses upon senior Afghan government officials that they need to be prepared to take more responsibility quickly. He stated confidently that while one to two years is insufficient time to end terrorism, it should be enough to root out Al-Qaeda and weaken the Taliban. UNAMA Spokesperson Nelab Mobarez, among others, emphasized the importance of strengthening the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) in order to successfully transfer security responsibility in 2011. Some analysts also stressed the need for improved governance and more efficient reconstruction to ensure a smooth transfer of responsibility.

15. (U) Other Afghans viewed the 2011 timeline as evidence of our unwillingness to commit long-term to Afghanistan. Former Deputy Defense Minister General Attequllah Baryali told Radio VOA Dari that setting a timeline for troop withdrawal will cause Afghans to worry the United States is not truly committed to the country, comparing the situation to when the Soviet Union withdrew and Afghanistan collapsed into civil war. He also worried that sufficiently building ANSF capacity could take 5-10 years, not 18 months. A journalism student from the American University in Afghanistan (AUAF) warned that setting an 18-month timeline would embolden insurgents.

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Afghanistan's Neighbors

16. (U) Most political commentators and analysts emphasized the important role Afghanistan's neighbors play in securing the country. MP Dawood Sultanazai told Tolo TV that the new strategy will fail unless the international community takes Afghanistan's neighbors into serious account. In the GMIC meeting, Professor Stanekzai stipulated that "America must assert pressure on Pakistan," while MFA official Muradian praised President Obama and Gordon Brown for "pointing out that Taliban leadership now resides in Pakistan."

17. (U) While analysts were pleased to see President Obama's continued emphasis on Pakistan, many were skeptical that Pakistan would do its part in eradicating terrorism within its borders. At the GMIC event, Professor Stanekzai told journalists it would be a big achievement "if Pakistan focused on itself," but then qualified his statement by saying "it is no doubt that Pakistan will never want stability in Afghanistan". At the same event, an AUAF student questioned why the United States "is sending 30,000 new troops to Afghanistan and only money to Pakistan, despite acknowledging that the terrorists are in Pakistan." Eikenberry